

The Church of Saint-Sulpice

The incongruity of neo-gothic restorations to a traditional classical building



Façade after restoration
Photo : Germain Casavant

In the 18th century, the parish of Saint-Sulpice to the east of Montréal was part of the heritage of the Montréal Sulpicians. This explains the dedication of the parish. Three churches succeeded each other on the present site. The first, erected in 1706 was replaced in 1723, and construction of the present church began in 1832 after authorisation was granted by Monsignor Panet, bishop of Québec.

A neo-classical building

The structure of the building clearly shows the adaptation of the neo-classical principles developed by Thomas Baillargé and Jérôme Demers in the eighteenth-twenties. The rural situation explains why the rather grandiose and antiquarian ideas of the architecture of the time required simplification in this instance. At the same time, some of the more formal elements deriving from the traditional architectural concepts are clearly evident in this building. In this respect the Church of Saint-Sulpice bears a resemblance to that of la Présentation in Saint-Hyacinthe.

It is built in the form of a Latin cross which ends simply in a flat chevet. The façade is divided into three sections and is adorned with a Doric doorway surmounted with a triangular pediment. A superposed lantern belfry completes the composition. These are the principal characteristics which illustrate the transformation from forms in keeping with the architectural tradition of the French regime to a situation where the neo-classical vocabulary has become more important.



Interior
Photo : Germain Casavant

At the time this church was built, the prevailing taste in interior décor was for the stylistic fashions belonging to the age of Louis XV. This kind of work was developed principally by artists from the school of Louis-Amable Quévillon. The paucity of documentation available on this original interior unfortunately does not allow for an in-depth analysis. At the most, we know that in spite of the work carried out by Louis-Xavier Leprohon between 1847 and 1850, the interior did not meet with the satisfaction of the parishioners.

A strange alteration in 1873

In 1873, Victor Bourgeau and Louis-Xavier Leprohon, both architects from Montréal, suggested a neo-gothic transformation of the neo-classical style. It is known that since the eighteen-forties and fifties, there was a significant trend towards Medieval forms in the diocese of Montréal. This led to the idea of giving a gothic appearance to the Church of Saint-Sulpice despite the presence of a pre-existing neo-classical structure.



Interior towards façade
Photo : Germain Casavant

The exterior therefore underwent a partial reconstruction and the interior was completely refashioned. Some 60 centimetres were added to the walls in order to transform the semicircular windows into neo-gothic pointed windows. The gable was widened out on the façade and two corbels were added to the ends, such as can be seen in la Présentation, which suggests the effect of a screen-façade similar to that of Saint-Hilaire. Finally, gothic openings were placed in the classical portals in a completely incongruous manner. The combination of the Doric doorway, the traditional style bell-tower, and the new Medieval-inspired openings is, to say the least, destabilising.



Maître-autel
Photo : Germain
Casavant

A more homogeneous interior

The main emphasis of this restoration project lay in the new interior designed by Bourgeau and Leprohon. It is therefore possible that the adaptation of some of the exterior features was aiming to provide a link between the structural work and the new interior.

And what an interior these virtuosi of the neo-gothic bequeathed to us! The structure of the ceiling is particularly spectacular. It was inspired by the impressive English architecture of the 13th and 15th centuries when vast spaces, whether religious or secular, were covered by enormous frameworks where the trusses remained partly revealed. This method of construction gives a regular, strict rhythm to the interior.

The altars, for their part, are particularly impressive. They were designed with the 'decorated style' in mind, and fit in well with the rest of the interior which is thus endowed with a great sense of integrity. The church is, without a doubt, a fine example of how a large-scale urban neo-gothic construction can be adapted to suit a smaller parochial situation.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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